United Nations E/1998/94

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
28 July 1998

Original: English

Substantive session of 1998
New York, 6–31 July 1998
Agenda item 14 (g)
Social and human rights questions: human rights

Privileges and immunities of the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the independence of judges and lawyers

Note by the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 22 A (I) of 13 February 1946, the General Assembly adopted, pursuant to Article 105 (3) of the Charter of the United Nations, the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations (the Convention). Since then, 137 Member States have become parties to the Convention, and its provisions have been incorporated by reference into many hundreds of agreements relating to the headquarters or seats of the United Nations and its organs, and to activities carried out by the Organization in nearly every country of the world.

2. That Convention is, *inter alia*, designed to protect various categories of persons, including "Experts on Mission for the United Nations", from all types of interference by national authorities. In particular, Section 22 (b) of Article VI of the Convention provides:

> *Section 22*: "Experts (other than officials coming within the scope of Article V) performing missions for the United Nations shall be accorded such privileges and immunities as are necessary for the independent exercise of their functions during the period of their missions, including time spent on journeys in connection with their missions. In particular they shall be accorded:
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> "...
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> "(b) in respect of words spoken or written and acts done by them in the course of the performance of their mission, immunity from legal process of any kind. This immunity from legal process shall continue to be accorded notwithstanding that the persons concerned are no longer employed on missions for the United Nations."

3. In its Advisory Opinion of 14 December 1989, on the "Applicability of Article VI, Section 22, of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations" (the so-called "Mazilou case"), the International Court of Justice held that a Special Rapporteur of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities of the Commission on Human Rights was an "expert on mission" within the meaning of Article VI of the Convention.

4. The Commission on Human Rights, by its resolution 1994/41 of 4 March 1994, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its decision 1994/251 of 22 July 1994, appointed Dato' Param Cumaraswamy, a Malaysian jurist, as the Commission's Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers. His mandate consists of tasks including, *inter alia*, to inquire into substantial allegations concerning, and to identify and record attacks on,

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the independence of the judiciary, lawyers and court officials. Mr. Cumaraswamy has submitted four reports to the Commission on the execution of his mandate: E/CN.4/1995/39, E/CN.4/1996/37, E/CN.4/1997/32 and E/CN.4/1998/39. After the third report containing a section on the litigation pending against him in the Malaysian civil courts, the Commission at its fifty-fourth session, in April 1997, renewed his mandate for an additional three years.

5. In November 1995 the Special Rapporteur gave an interview to *International Commercial Litigation*, a magazine published in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland but circulated also in Malaysia, in which he commented on certain litigations that had been carried out in Malaysian courts. As a result of an article published on the basis of that interview, two commercial companies in Malaysia asserted that the said article contained defamatory words that had "brought them into public scandal, odium and contempt". Each company filed a suit against him for damages amounting to M$ 30 million (approximately US$ 12 million each), "including exemplary damages for slander".

6. Acting on behalf of the Secretary-General, the Legal Counsel considered the circumstances of the interview and of the controverted passages of the article and determined that Dato' Param Cumaraswamy was interviewed in his official capacity as Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, that the article clearly referred to his United Nations capacity and to the Special Rapporteur's United Nations global mandate to investigate allegations concerning the independence of the judiciary, and that the quoted passages related to such allegations. On 15 January 1997, the Legal Counsel, in a note verbale addressed to the Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations, therefore "requested the competent Malaysian authorities to promptly advise the Malaysian courts of the Special Rapporteur's immunity from legal process" with respect to that particular complaint. On 20 January 1997, the Special Rapporteur filed an application in the High Court of Kuala Lumpur (the trial court in which the said suit had been filed) to set aside and/or strike out the Plaintiffs' writ, on the ground that the words that were the subject of the suits had been spoken by him in the course of performing his mission for the United Nations as Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers. The Secretary-General issued a note on 7 March 1997 confirming that "the words which constitute the basis of plaintiffs' complaint in this case were spoken by the Special Rapporteur in the course of his mission" and that the Secretary-General "therefore maintains that Dato' Param Cumaraswamy is immune from legal process with respect thereto". The Special Rapporteur filed this note in support of his above-mentioned application.

7. After a draft of a certificate that the Minister for Foreign Affairs proposed to file with the trial court had been discussed with representatives of the Office of Legal Affairs, who had indicated that the draft set out the immunities of the Special Rapporteur incompletely and inadequately, the Minister nevertheless on 12 March 1997 filed the certificate in the form originally proposed; in particular the final sentence of that certificate in effect invited the trial court to determine at its own discretion whether the immunity applied, by stating that this was the case "*only* in respect of words spoken or written and acts done by him in the course of the performance of his mission" (emphasis added). In spite of the representations that had been made by the Office of Legal Affairs, the certificate failed to refer in any way to the note that the Secretary-General had issued a few days earlier and that had in the meantime been filed with the court, nor did it indicate that in this respect, i.e. in deciding whether particular words or acts of an expert fell within the scope of his mission, the determination could exclusively be made by the Secretary-General, and that such determination had conclusive effect and therefore had to be accepted as such by the court. In spite of repeated requests by the Legal Counsel, the Minister for Foreign Affairs refused to amend his certificate or to supplement it in the manner urged by the United Nations.

8. On 28 June 1997, the competent judge of the Malaysian High Court for Kuala Lumpur concluded that she was "unable to hold that the Defendant is absolutely protected by the immunity he claims", in part because she considered that the Secretary-General's note was merely "an opinion" with scant probative value and no binding force upon the court and that the Minister for Foreign Affairs' certificate "would appear to be no more than a bland statement as to a state of fact pertaining to the Defendant's status and mandate as a Special Rapporteur and appears to have room for interpretation". The Court ordered that the Special Rapporteur's motion be dismissed with costs, that costs be taxed and paid forthwith by him and that he file and serve his defence within 14 days. On 8 July, the Court of Appeal dismissed Mr. Cumaraswamy's motion for a stay of execution.

9. On 30 June and 7 July 1997, the Legal Counsel thereupon sent notes verbales to the Permanent Representative of Malaysia, and also held meetings with him and his Deputy. In the latter note, the Legal Counsel, *inter alia*, called on the Malaysian Government to intervene in the current proceedings so that the burden of any further defence, including any expenses and taxed costs resulting

therefrom, be assumed by the Government; to hold Mr. Cumaraswamy harmless in respect of the expenses he had already incurred or that were being taxed to him in respect of the proceedings so far; and, so as to prevent the accumulation of additional expenses and costs and the further need to submit a defence until the matter of his immunity was definitively resolved between the United Nations and the Government, to support a motion to have the High Court proceedings stayed until such resolution. The Legal Counsel referred to the provisions for the settlement of differences arising out of the interpretation and application of the 1946 Convention that might arise between the Organization and a Member State, which are set out in Section 30 of the Convention, and indicated that if the Government decided that it cannot or does not wish to protect and to hold harmless the Special Rapporteur in the indicated manner, a difference within the meaning of those provisions might be considered to have arisen between the Organization and the Government of Malaysia.

10. Section 30 of the Convention provides as follows:

> *Section 30*: "All differences arising out of the interpretation or application of the present convention shall be referred to the International Court of Justice, unless in any case it is agreed by the parties to have recourse to another mode of settlement. If a difference arises between the United Nations on the one hand and a Member on the other hand, a request shall be made for an advisory opinion on any legal question involved in accordance with Article 96 of the Charter and Article 65 of the Statute of the Court. The opinion given by the Court shall be accepted as decisive by the parties."

11. On 10 July yet another lawsuit was filed against the Special Rapporteur by one the lawyers mentioned in the magazine article referred to in paragraph 5 above, based on precisely the same passages of the interview and claiming damages in an amount of M$ 60 million (US$ 24 million). On 11 July, the Secretary-General issued a note corresponding to the one of 7 March 1997 (see para. 6 above) and also communicated a note verbale with essentially the same text to the Permanent Representative of Malaysia with the request that it be presented formally to the competent Malaysian court by the Government.

12. On 23 October and 21 November 1997, new plaintiffs filed a third and fourth lawsuit against the Special Rapporteur for M$ 100 million (US$ 40 million) and M$ 60 million (US$ 24 million) respectively. On 27 October and 22 November 1997, the Secretary-General issued identical certificates of the Special Rapporteur's immunity.

13. On 7 November 1997, the Secretary-General advised the Prime Minister of Malaysia that a difference might have arisen between the United Nations and the Government of Malaysia and about the possibility of resorting to the International Court of Justice pursuant to Section 30 of the Convention. Nonetheless on 19 February 1998, the Federal Court of Malaysia denied Mr. Cumaraswamy's application for leave to appeal stating that he is neither a sovereign nor a full-fledged diplomat but merely "an unpaid, part-time provider of information".

14. The Secretary-General then appointed a Special Envoy, Maître Yves Fortier of Canada, who, on 26 and 27 February 1998, undertook an official visit to Kuala Lumpur to reach an agreement with the Government of Malaysia on a joint submission to the International Court of Justice. Following that visit, on 13 March 1998 the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malaysia informed the Secretary-General's Special Envoy of his Government's desire to reach an out-of-court settlement. In an effort to reach such a settlement, the Office of Legal Affairs proposed the terms of such a settlement on 23 March 1998 and a draft settlement agreement on 26 May 1998. Although the Government of Malaysia succeeded in staying proceedings in the four lawsuits until September 1998, no final settlement agreement was concluded. During this period, the Government of Malaysia insisted that, in order to negotiate a settlement, Maître Fortier must return to Kuala Lumpur. While Maître Fortier preferred to undertake the trip only once a preliminary agreement between the Parties had been reached, nonetheless, based on the Prime Minister of Malaysia's request that Maître Fortier return as soon as possible, the Secretary-General requested his Special Envoy to do so.

15. Maître Fortier undertook a second official visit to Kuala Lumpur, from 25 to 28 July 1998, during which he concluded that the Government of Malaysia was not going to participate either in settling this matter or in preparing a joint submission to the current session of the Economic and Social Council. The Secretary-General's Special Envoy therefore advised that the matter should be referred to the Council to request an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice. The United Nations had exhausted all efforts to reach either a negotiated settlement or a joint submission through the Council to the International Court of Justice. In this connection, the Government of Malaysia has acknowledged the Organization's right to refer the matter to the Council to request an advisory opinion in accordance with Section 30 of the Convention, advised the Secretary-General's Special Envoy that the United Nations should proceed to do so, and indicated that, while it will make its own presentations to the International Court of

Justice, it does not oppose the submission of the matter to that Court through the Council.

16. The Secretary-General considers it most important that the principle be accepted that it is for himself alone to determine, with conclusive effect (except as indicated in para. 17 below), whether a member of the staff of the Organization or an expert on mission has spoken or written words or performed an act "in their official capacity" (in the case of officials) or "in the performance of their mission" (in the case of experts on mission). Unless such conclusive effect is accorded to his determinations in this respect, it will be for national courts to determine – and in respect of a given word or act there may be several national courts – whether an official or an expert, or a former official or expert, enjoys immunity in respect of his words or acts. The adjudication of United Nations privileges and immunities in the national courts would be certain to have a negative effect on the independence of officials and experts, who would then have to fear that at any time, whether they were still in office or after they had left it, they could be called to account in national courts, not necessarily their own, civilly or criminally, for their words spoken or written or acts performed as officials or experts.

17. Although the decision of the Secretary-General must thus be considered as not subject to challenge in national courts, it can, of course, be challenged by a Government concerned pursuant to Section 30 of the 1946 Convention (quoted in para. 10 above), in which case the matter would be decided with binding effect by the International Court of Justice.

18. It should be pointed out that Section 23 of the 1946 Convention provides in respect of experts (and similarly Section 20 in respect of officials) that:

> *Section 23*: "Privileges and immunities are granted to experts in the interests of the United Nations and not for the personal benefit of the individuals themselves. The Secretary-General shall have the right and the duty to waive the immunity of any expert in any case where, in his opinion, the immunity would impede the course of justice and it can be waived without prejudice to the interests of the United Nations."

Thus any abuse of the immunities of an expert (or an official) would be prevented by the right and duty of the Secretary-General to waive such immunity under the circumstances specified in those sections.

19. In connection with this case, it should also be noted that the Secretary-General received a communication from the Special Rapporteurs/Representatives/Experts and Chairpersons of Working Groups of the Commission on Human Rights and the Advisory Services Programme of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights which indicated that "undermining the immunity accorded to one expert constitutes an attack on the entire system and institution of United Nations human rights special procedures and mechanisms". Moreover, on 29 May 1998, the Fifth Meeting of Special Rapporteurs/Representatives/Experts and Chairpersons of Working Groups of the Commission on Human Rights and of the Advisory Services Programmes adopted a statement entitled the "Judicial Harassment of a Special Rapporteur" urging the Secretary-General to refer the matter to the International Court of Justice pursuant to Section 30 of the Convention. The Secretary-General received innumerable interventions from representatives of the international human rights and legal community reflecting the overwhelming consensus in favour of referring the matter to the International Court of Justice.

20. Finally, it is necessary to point out that unless the Government of Malaysia accepts the responsibility, costs and expenses of ensuring respect for the Special Rapporteur's immunity through appropriate interventions in the Malaysian courts, then these considerable expenses might have to be assumed by the Organization itself as it considers that the words that constitute the basis of the plaintiffs' complaint were spoken by the Rapporteur in the course of his mission.

21. As the Organization and the Government of Malaysia agree that a difference has arisen between them out of the interpretation or application of the Convention and as they have been unable to agree on another mode of settlement, the difference should be referred to the International Court of Justice in accordance with Section 30 of the Convention and the following request for an advisory opinion should be made in accordance with Article 96 of the Charter of the United Nations and Article 65 of the Statute of the Court:

> "Considering the difference that has arisen between the United Nations and the Government of Malaysia with respect to the immunity from legal process of Mr. Dato' Param Cumaraswamy, the United Nations Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, in respect of certain words spoken by him:
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> "1. Subject only to Section 30 of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, does the Secretary-General of the United Nations have the exclusive authority to determine whether words were spoken in the course of the performance of a mission for the

United Nations within the meaning of Section 22 (b) of the Convention?

"2. In accordance with Section 34 of the Convention, once the Secretary-General has determined that such words were spoken in the course of the performance of a mission and has decided to maintain, or not to waive, the immunity from legal process, does the Government of a Member State party to the Convention have an obligation to give effect to that immunity in its national courts and, if failing to do so, to assume responsibility for, and any costs, expenses and damages arising from, any legal proceedings brought in respect of such words?

"Pending receipt of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which shall be accepted as decisive by the parties, the Government of Malaysia is called upon to ensure that all judgements and proceedings in this matter in the Malaysian courts are stayed."